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SPENSER AND THE SPIRIT OF PURITANISM

It is the aim of this paper to determine Spenser's relation to the inner and essential spirit of Puritanism, its animating life-principle, as distinguished from its theological beliefs and its ecclesiastical program.¹

Stripped of all accidents, what was Puritanism? In his excellent monograph on *The Controversy between the Puritans and the Stage*, Professor E. N. S. Thompson defines it as that "which seeks to obtain the fullest possible conception of the divine idea in the world, and to make that idea rule," as "the effort to rid life, or some phases of it, of the evils that have enwrapped it." If this definition be valid, everyone who has earnestly sought to understand the divine idea in the world and to make it prevail, everyone who has endeavored to rid life of evil, is a Puritan, and the measure of his Puritanism is his devotion to such a program. We must therefore number among the Puritans, Pope Gregory, Bede and Anselm, Dante, Herbert, Newman, Browning, Arnold, Chesterton, Shaw, and Mrs. Eddy, as well as Cartwright, Baxter, Bunyan, and Cromwell. Thus to define Puritanism is to rid the term of all historical significance.

According to Dr. John Brown, the author of *The English Puritans*, a recent volume in the Cambridge manuals,

The fundamental idea of Puritanism in all its manifestations was the supreme authority of Scripture brought to bear upon the conscience, as opposed to an unenlightened reliance on the priesthood and the outward ordinances of the Church. . . . Under all its forms, reverence for Scripture, and for the sovereign majesty of God, a severe morality, popular sympathies, and a fervent attachment to the cause of civil freedom have been the signs and tokens of the puritan spirit.

Now this definition would exclude from the ranks of the Puritans the very men who first bore the epithet of "puritan," for the Elizabethan Presbyterians could never be accused of "popular sympathies

¹ These aspects of Puritanism have been discussed in other papers: *The Political and Ecclesiastical Allegory of the "Faerie Queene,"* Boston, 1912; "Spenser's Arraignment of the Anabaptists," *Jour. Eng. and Germ. Phil.*, XII, 434; "Spenser's Fowre Hymnes," *ibid.*, XIII, 418; "Spenser and the Puritan Propaganda," *Mod. Phil.*, XI, 85; "Spenser and the Theology of Calvin," *ibid.*, XII, 1.

and a fervent attachment to the cause of civil freedom." Indeed, one of the accusations that rankled most in the breast of Cartwright, the leader of this party, was the charge that he sympathized with the Anabaptists, the one sect that had stood frankly for a democratic program. The Presbyterian frowned upon these Anabaptists, and later upon the Separatists, quite as coldly as did the Anglican. It must not be forgotten, then, that these early Presbyterians were not concerned with political reform, and if their successors under James and Charles took a lively interest in such reform, even their altruism did not extend beyond the desire to secure greater liberty for the upper middle class, namely, themselves. To what extent these Presbyterian gentlemen were carried away with "popular sympathies" is sufficiently evident from the conduct of such of their number as sought a new home beyond seas, for did they not arrest the democratic zeal of the Separatist Pilgrims, and did they not drive into the wilderness the very apostles of a true liberty who fled to them for shelter? On the other hand, among the seventeenth-century Puritans must be numbered a great body of republicans, who were fired with the zeal for political liberty, and who were only incidentally concerned with religious reform, if indeed concerned with it at all. Presbyterian and proletarian united in a common cause, yet they were two quite independent elements, as their ultimate disruption proved. No definition of Puritanism is satisfactory, then, that is not comprehensive enough to include such diverse factions as the Presbyterians, the Independents, and the republicans.

The initial impulse of Puritanism was desire for reform in spiritual matters. This reform might be narrowly conceived, to substitute one's own system of church government and discipline for the system in vogue, as in the program of the Presbyterians, or, as in the program of the Brownists and Separatists—the later Independents—it might be conceived as a universal principle, to allow every man to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience, recognizing no other church government than that of voluntary churches, self-governed under Christ and mutually independent. As time went on and it became increasingly evident that reform in spiritual matters was contingent upon reform in government, such reform, hitherto an independent movement confined to a small minority of the socially

discontent, was incorporated into the Puritan platform. This reform, in turn, might be narrowly conceived, to establish the authority of one's own class in place of the traditional authority—in the program of the Presbyterians to substitute Whig authority for Tory authority, or, broadly conceived, to secure the real democratization of government; in the program of the Independents and their political allies, nothing less than to convert England into a republic. It is in the light of these facts that a definition of Puritanism should be framed. Puritanism, then, was the effort to secure reform, either partial or complete, in spiritual or in political matters, or in both.

Because, during the Elizabethan period, the agitation for political change was confined to certain small and very much despised sects, political reform cannot be taken as characteristic of Elizabethan Puritanism. It became a characteristic of Puritanism only in the days of James and Charles. Elizabethan Puritanism was in the main, then, busied with the effort to secure reform in religious matters. Moreover, the dominant party in the movement was the Presbyterian, for the Separatists and Brownists were as yet too few and too uninfluential to have much weight. Consequently the genius of Elizabethan Puritanism was the genius of Presbyterianism, and, because the early Puritanism had thus been captured by Geneva, its program was Calvinistic. In Calvinism, therefore, are found the distinguishing characteristics of Elizabethan Puritanism.

Now these English Calvinists were bent on two reforms: a change in the organization and procedure of the church in conformity with the Presbyterian system, and a reform in the whole attitude of society toward life. The first, already treated in other papers, was largely a matter of externals; the second was the essential reform, for it was aimed at the very roots of conduct, and constitutes the very essence of the Elizabethan Puritanism. The attitude toward life that these Puritans sought to inculcate was grounded in the Calvinistic doctrine of the spiritual man and the natural man.

The Calvinist believed that the spiritual man was capable of communion with God, and this communion he passionately desired. Herein he differed not from the Catholic. Calvinist and Catholic alike yearned to know and see God, as the writings of Dante and Bunyan, of Bernard of Clairvaux and Baxter, eloquently testify.

But there was this difference, that the Catholic was willing to recognize and employ intermediary agencies as approaches to God, indeed felt it desirable and in most cases necessary to do so, whereas the Calvinist insisted that this communion should be direct and immediate, and that any intermediary agencies were in reality barriers between the soul and God, alike a hindrance to the soul and an affront to God.

As for the natural man, the Calvinist believed that man is by nature impure and unholy, and that the senses are, and must continue to be, at enmity with God's purposes; that the flesh was present as a dreadful menace, and that unconverted man was odious in God's sight. The Catholic, on the other hand, believed that in the natural man good and evil were blended, and that the office of religion was to quicken the natural conscience and discipline the natural will. He believed that the body and the mind were God's gifts, and that the pleasures of mind and body, while inferior to those of the soul, and ultimately to be supplanted by them, were not inherently antagonistic to them. Consequently he did not frown upon the pleasures of life but accepted them with a glad heart. He felt that God wished him to live a rich, full-blooded life, enjoying those harmless pleasures which refresh the body and the mind, enjoying beauty of color and form and sound and odor, enjoying the fruits of the earth that make glad the heart of man, and enjoying those superior pleasures of the mind that attend upon the exercise of the intellect. Not only did he believe that the pleasures of the senses were legitimate in themselves, if ever kept subordinate, but that the senses might be the very medium for interpreting the things of the spirit. Hence the physical element was present in almost every appeal that the Catholic church made. Harmonious color, sweet sound, and fragrant odor suggested to the imagination, through the senses, the inscrutable glories of the Unseen. Indeed, the Holy Eucharist itself, the very heart of Catholicism, was a natural blending of the natural and the supernatural, wherein God took advantage of physical means to impart his saving health to a needy humanity.

If an illustration may be borrowed from a modern writer, the essential difference between the attitude of Catholicism and of Calvinism is compressed into the remark that Dr. Lavendar addresses

to Rachael King about her foster-child, in Mrs. Deland's story of *The Child's Mother*: "Well, I suppose it's natural for you, Rachael, to be afraid of the inheritance from her earthly mother, but mind you don't forget her inheritance from her Heavenly Father, my dear." It was this last inheritance that Calvinism was reluctant to recognize.

Such being the genius of Calvinism, it was essentially incompatible with the spirit of the Renaissance. If it had its springs in that desire for spiritual freedom which animated the Reformation, it attempted to realize this at the expense of that liberation of the social, aesthetic, and intellectual faculties which the Renaissance was demanding with equal insistence. If it sought to develop the powers of religion and of conduct, it begrudged a like development to the power of knowledge, to the power of beauty, and to the power of social life and manners. The great problem of the modern era has been to harmonize the spirit of the Reformation and the spirit of the Renaissance, to acknowledge and provide for every man the universal right to self-realization, and to conceive this self-realization as a liberation of all the faculties. Historically, this conception of a harmonious self-realization has preceded the recognition of the right of every man to attain thereto; indeed, this recognition is only partial today, after three centuries of slow change. But this conception of the human spirit as beautifully adjusted to all of the claims of life, this passion for harmonious self-realization, this conception and this passion, it was the problem of Elizabethan England to perceive and to feel. It was perceived and felt by a few rare spirits, perceived and felt by a Sidney and a Hooker—Hooker, of whom Dowden has said with equal justice and eloquence: "The spirit of the Renaissance is brought into harmony by him with the spirit of the Reformation; he is serious, reverent, devout; with seriousness and reverence he does honour to human reason; a grave feeling for beauty models his elaborate periods; he can soar and circle aloft in a wide orbit, yet all the time he remains in living relation with the concrete fact and the realities of human life; he is at once humanist and theologian."¹

To be faithful to all of life—that was the problem of the Elizabethans. This problem Calvinized Puritanism did not understand

¹ *Puritan and Anglican*, p. 69.

or see. In the earlier decades there were many moderate men who espoused the Puritan cause, for, despite the rigidity of the theology that they professed, their practical conduct was tempered by the traditional influence of a sweeter and more Catholic philosophy, but as the theology of Calvin struck deeper root, as its logic became more apparent, accentuated by the growing looseness of English morals, the Puritans became austere, stern, and morose, contracted in sympathies, lacking all sense of proportion, and, equally fatal, all sense of humor. These were the ultimate and logical results of Calvinistic teachings both in Old England and in New England, and Old England and New England only escaped from these results when the vitality of Calvinism had spent itself, and men had reacted to a more Catholic interpretation of life.

The essential spirit of Elizabethan Puritanism, if we may condense all that has been said above, was the attempt to realize fidelity to the things of the spirit through infidelity to all other human faculties.

Such being the essential spirit of Puritanism, to what extent can it be said of Spenser that he was a Puritan? In common with most English churchmen of his generation, he professed the Calvinistic theology; his theological views would have satisfied the most austere Puritan. Did he, however, take the attitude toward the various powers of life that these views logically required? To this question his devotion to the humanistic ideals gives abundant answer. Save when consciously presenting some phase of theology, he advocates and illustrates that full and rich enjoyment of the senses and of the life of the intellect that was the glory of the Renaissance.

He exalts the scholar with a classic faith in the integrity of the intellectual life, calling learning the "girlond of nobilitie," and he exalts arms with the enthusiasm of knight and cavalier. Indeed, it is hard to say whether with Plato he would put the scholar first in society or with Castiglione the statescraftsman; like Aristotle, he wavers between giving highest honor to the leader in state affairs or to the philosopher who, by contemplation, identifies himself with the whole world. If in "The Teares of the Muses" it is said of learning that "men to God thereby are nearest raised," elsewhere sage and warrior are almost invariably associated together as the

noblest products of society. Thus, in the lament of Calliope complaint is made that princes, once the patrons of art,

Have both desire of worthie deeds forlorne,

And name of learning utterly doo scorne,

and in "The Ruines of Time" that, since the death of Sidney,

learning lies unregarded,

And men of armes doo wander unrewarded.

In the "Mother Hubberds Tale" the life of the courtly gentleman is outlined as the beau ideal of conduct, a life conceived largely in the spirit of Castiglione, though more magnanimous, less selfishly calculating, a life devoted to noble activities of the body—the tourney, the chase, wrestling, drawing of the bow, to the sweet delights of music, to the gentle sports of love, to poetry, science, and history. These were occupations requiring a large share of life for proficiency, and not worth the candle if the benefits were but transient. Here there is indeed recognition of the propriety of a full and free enjoyment of the humane activities of body and mind, a generous enthusiasm for Renaissance ideals.

In the *Faerie Queene* the reader moves in a world where delight constantly ministers to the senses—music, painting, gentle landscape, the soft glances and swelling beauty of maidens. It is almost too much of a commonplace to say that Spenser is the very hierophant of beauty.

Nowhere is Spenser's relation to the dominant Renaissance impulses more curiously displayed than in his treatment of chastity. So anxious is he to emphasize the preciousness of this rare virtue that the hero of one book is the knight of chastity, and in other books chastity plays no inconsiderable part. Certainly the lessons of chastity are written large, so that one cannot fail to read them. Britomart, Belphebe, and Florimel are very paragons of continence. Conversely, the moral decline of one woman, Hellenore, is depicted with dramatic warning: when first seen, a lady of voluptuous beauty who flirts with a strange knight at the table of her lord; when last seen the common stale of the vulgar. And yet, despite all of this labored didacticism, Spenser can present amorous situations with a warmth and a nice eye for effect designed to satisfy the most scrupulous connoisseur in a period when the connoisseur was, to say the

least, exacting. No Renaissance realist could claim an advantage over Spenser's voluptuous picture, in the famous description of the Bower of Bliss, of maidens at the bath. To be sure the placid Palmer, whose blood had been cooled by age, mildly reproves Guyon for gazing with kindling eyes upon a spectacle so tempting, but the poet is careful not to intrude this reproof with unbecoming haste:

And all the margent round about was sett
 With shady Laurell trees, thence to defend
 The sunny beames which on the billowes bett,
 And those that therein bathed mote offend.
 As Guyon hapned by the same to wend,
 Two naked Damzelles he therein espyde,
 Which therein bathing seemed to contend
 And wrestle wantonly, ne car'd to hyde
 Their dainty partes from vew of any which them eyd.

Sometimes the one would lift the other quight
 Above the waters, and then downe againe
 Her plong, as over-maystered by might,
 Where both awhile would covered remaine,
 And each the other from to rise restraine;
 The whiles their snowy limbes, as through a vele,
 So through the christall waves appeared plaine:
 Then suddainly both would themselves unhele,
 And th' amorous sweet spolies to greedy eyes revele.

As that faire Starre, the messenger of morne,
 His deawy face out of the sea doth reare;
 Or as the Cyprian goddessse, newly borne
 Of the Ocean's fruitful froth, did first appeare:
 Such seemed they, and so their yellow heare
 Christalline humor dropped downe apace.
 Whom such when Guyon saw, he drew him neare,
 And somewhat gan relent his earnest pace;
 His stubborne brest gan secret pleasaunce to embrace.

The wanton Maidens, him espying, stood
 Gazing awhile at his unwonted guize;
 Then th' one her selfe low ducked in the flood,
 Abasht that her a straunger did avise;
 But thother rather higher did arise,
 And her two lilly paps aloft displayed,
 And all that might his melting hart entyse

To her delights she unto him bewrayd;
The rest hidd underneath him more desirous made.

With that the other likewise up arose,
And her faire lockes, which formerly were bownd
Up in one knott, she low adowne did lose,
Which flowing low and thick her cloth'd arownd,
And th' yvorie in golden mantle gownd:
So that faire spectacle from him was reft,
Yet that which reft it no lesse faire was fownd.
So hidd in lockes and waves from lookers theft,
Nought but her lovely face she for his looking left.

Withall she laughed, and she blusht withall,
That blushing to her laughter gave more grace,
And laughter to her blushing, as did fall.
Now when they spyde the knight to slacke his pace
Them to behold, and in his sparkling face
The secrete signes, of kindled lust appeare,
Their wanton meriments they did encrease,
And to him beckned to approach more neare,
And shewd him many sights that corage cold could reare.

On which when gazing him the Palmer saw,
He much rebukt those wandring eyes of his,
And counseld well him forward thence to draw.¹

In all candor, this passage is done with a relish; done, to be sure, in the refined vein which the Elizabethans so well understood, the vein of Shakspeare in "The Rape of Lucrece," but eminently satisfactory to the exacting gentlemen who made up the society of the court.

Not only is much warmth of fleshly detail introduced into this and like passages where a moral is yet to follow, but such detail is sometimes purely gratuitous. Thus, the description of Diana at her bath is a quite unnecessary prelude to the meeting of Diana and Venus; forsooth Venus might just as well have discovered the round-limbed goddess after her toilet was complete.²

So generously, in fact, could the poet lend himself to the artistic impulse, that he employs stories of rape in a purely decorative spirit, with all of the charming abandon of the classical writers; the moral values quite forgotten in the color and vivacious beauty of the myth.

¹ *F. Q.* 2. 12. 63-38.

² *F. Q.* 3. 6. 18.

Such is the story of the parentage of the three brothers, Priamond, Triamond, and Diamond,

Borne of one mother in one happie mold,
 Borne at one burden in one happie morne;
 Thrice happie mother, and thrice happie morne,
 That bore three such, three such not to be fond!

“Thrice happie mother,” but, as M. Jusserand has observed with so much naughtiness, “thrice happy father, too,” as the story of the conception reveals:

There on a day a noble youthly knight,
 Seeking adventures in the salvage wood,
 Did by great fortune get of her the sight,
 As she sate carelesse by a cristall flood
 Combing her golden lockes, as seemed her good;
 And unawares upon her laying hold,
 That strove in vaine him long to have withstood,
 Oppressed her, and there (as it is told)
 Got these three lovely babes, that prov'd three champions
 bold.¹

Equally irresponsible, and equally diverting, is the story of the parentage of the good Sir Satyrane:

A satyres sonne, yborne in forest wyld,
 By straunge adventure as it did betyde,
 And there begotten of a Lady myld,
 Fayre Thamys, the daughter of Labryde;
 That was in sacred bandes of wedlocke tyde
 To Therion, a loose unruly swayne,
 Who had more joy to raunge the forest wyde,
 And chase the salvage beast with busie payne,
 Than serve his Ladies love, and waste in pleasures vayne.

The forlorne mayd did with loves longing burne,
 And could not lacke her lovers company;
 But to the woods she goes, to serve her turne,
 And seeke her spouse that from her still does fly,
 And followes other game and venery:
 A Satyre chaunst her wandering for to finde;
 And, kindling coles of lust in brutish eye,
 The loyall linkes of wedlock did unbinde,
 And made her person thrall unto his beastly kind.

F.Q. 4. 2. 41, 45.

So long in secret cabin there he held
 Her captive to his sensuall desyre,
 Till that with timely fruit her belly sweld,
 And bore a boy unto that salvage syre:
 Then home he suffred her for to retyre,
 For ransome leaving him the late-borne childe;
 Whom, till to ryper yeares he gan aspyre,
 He noused up in life and manners wilde,
 Amongst wild beastes and woods, from lawes of men exile.¹

This conduct apparently merits no disfavor in the poet's eye. Indeed, the domestic situation seems to be regarded as rather felicitous; the son develops no unfortunate hereditary traits, and the parents conspire to raise a model youth, brave, generous, and courteous.

Most engaging of all is the beautiful myth of Chrysogone, who became pregnant of the bright sunbeams as she slept "all naked bare," and bore the chaste Belpheobe and the fair Amorette, "a goodly storie to declare."²

These are very graceful and diverting episodes, but they are not the work of a man who resolutely fled from the gay shows of Vanity Fair that he might gain the City Celestial; not the kind of reading that Elder Skelton and Elder Higginson would have chosen to confirm in godliness the select youth of Salem.

In no other poem does Spenser show the true humanitarian that he was more convincingly than in the "Epithalamion," his own marriage ode. Though the poet had then reached the discreet age of forty-two, the coming nuptials, anticipated with that sincerity which does so much honor to the Elizabethans, are awaited with the tingling expectancy of youth, a passage very delicately touched, but withal very intense. The anticipated feasting and merrymaking would have satisfied the gayest of Cavaliers; no Puritan squeamishness is to mar the spirit of these festivities:

Never had man more joyfull day than this,
 Whom heaven would heape with blis;
 Make feast therefore now all this live-long day;
 This day for ever to me holy is.
 Poure out the wine without restraint or stay,

¹ *F.Q.* 1. 6. 21-23.

² *F.Q.* 3. 6.

Poure not by cups, but by the belly full,
 Poure out to all that wull,
 And sprinkle all the postes and wals with wine,
 That they may sweat, and drunken be withall.
 Crowne ye God Bacchus with a coronall,
 And Hymen also crowne with wreathes of vine;
 And let the Graces daunce unto the rest,
 For they can do it best:
 The whiles the maydens doe theyr carroll sing,
 To which the woods shall answer, and theyr eccho ring.
 Ring ye bells, ye yong men of the towne,

 Ring ye the bells, to make it weare away,
 And bonefiers make all day;
 And daunce about them, and about them sing,
 That all the woods may answer, and your eccho ring.

It is not enough for the heart of man to be gladdened with the good red wine; marry, the very walls and posts must drunken be! Forsooth, if Goodman Spenser actually furnished the entertainment anticipated in this ode, it was well for him that his nuptials were consummated in Cork or in Youghall, and not in Salem, Massachusetts.

In matters of moral conduct the great battleground of Elizabethan England was the stage. As early as 1560, William Alley was delivering at St. Paul's, the very heart of ecclesiastical England, lectures against plays and romances, and warning Christians of the danger of thus "saluting Venus." In 1570 Roger Ascham took similar ground in the *Scholemaster*, and censured for their wantonness not only the Latin plays but so goodly a romance as the *Morte D'Arthur*. Two years later, Edward Dering wrote in like vein, deprecating the fondness of the public for "onchast fables, and tragedies and such like sorceries," not even sparing good old Guy of Warwick. In 1577 John Northbrooke brought out his *Treatise*, in which the whole question of amusements was more elaborately considered than heretofore, and this was followed two years later by Gosson's famous work, *The School of Abuse*, the former condemning the stage primarily on religious, the latter on economic, grounds.¹ Opposed to these writers were another group who defended the drama, though not

¹ See E. N. S. Thompson, *The Controversy between the Puritans and the Stage*, chap. iv.

unmindful of its abuse; Sidney, who wrote in 1583 (?); Webbe, in 1586; Puttenham, in 1586; and Harrington, in 1589. With this group of men who thus took middle ground, Spenser clearly belongs. He himself wrote a defense of poetry, he was the author of several comedies, and he was greatly admired of Dekker and Lodge, themselves defenders of the stage. Though his essay on poetry is lost, its general temper may be gathered from "The Teares of the Muses," a poem in which each of the muses in turn laments the decadency of her own particular art. The poet's attitude toward comedy is here shown to be virtually identical with that of Sidney: comedy should hold the mirror up to nature, and refined play of seemly wit should furnish delight; if laughter be provoked, it should be a laughter that is consistent with such noble pleasure.

All places they with follie have posset,
And with vaine toyes the vulgare enttaine;
But me have banished, with all the rest,
That whilome wont to wait upon my traine,
Fine Counterfesaunce, and unhurtfull Sport,
Delight, and Laughter, deckt in seemly sort.

All these, and all that els the Comick Stage
With seasoned wit and goodly pleasance graced,
By which mans life in his likest image
Was limned forth, are wholly now defaced;
And those sweete wits, which wont the like to frame,
Are now despized, and made a laughing game.¹

In like vein Sidney is very careful to show how delight and laughter may be harmoniously adjusted in comedy:

But our comedians think there is no delight without laughter, which is very wrong; for though laughter may come with delight, yet cometh it not of delight, as though delight should be the cause of laughter; but well may one thing breed both together. Nay, rather in themselves they have, as it were, a kind of contrarity. For delight we scarcely do, but in things that have a conveniency to ourselves, or to the general nature; laughter almost ever cometh of things most disproportioned to ourselves and nature. Delight hath a joy in it either permanent or present; laughter hath only a scornful tickling. . . . Yet deny I not but that they may go well together. For as in Alexander's picture well set out we delight without laughter, and in twenty mad antics we laugh without delight: so in Hercules, painted, with

¹ 93-100.

his great beard and furious countenance, in women's attire, spinning at Omphale's commandment, it breedeth both delight and laughter; for the representing of so strange a power in love procureth delight, and the scornfulness of the action stirreth laughter.¹

Certainly Spenser is not to be associated with those Puritans who condemned stage-plays without discrimination, and even frowned upon those goodly romances of the older days that were very meat and drink to the poet.

But enough of this, which has the wearisomeness of a thrice-told tale. With a scholar's faith in the integrity of the intellectual life, an apostle of beauty, a lover of the good things of life, assuredly Spenser was in the main an admirable exponent of the Renaissance, however contradictory to its spirit his theological professions may have been, and however studiously he may have striven at times to give expression to Calvinistic teachings in his art.

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¹ Cook's ed., 50-51.